Hybrid Identities and Colonial Power: Negotiating Selfhood in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives*

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of German colonial power structures on the identities of marginalised individuals in Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel Afterlives (2020). It explores how colonial hierarchies, cultural displacement, and patriarchal oppression shaped fractured identities, while also highlighting the strategies of resilience and resistance that emerged within East African communities under German colonialism. Employing a qualitative methodology, the study applies close reading and thematic analysis, framed by Edward Said's concept of Orientalism and Homi K. Bhabha's theories of mimicry and hybridity. The analysis demonstrates that Ilyas' tragic assimilation reflects the ambivalence of mimicry, Hamza's selective retention of cultural identity illustrates the transformative potential of hybridity, and Afiya's perseverance reveals the intersectionality of gendered oppression and agency in colonial contexts. Ultimately, the study argues that while colonial power fragmented subjectivities, it also opened possibilities for cultural reclamation and resistance, providing new insights into the psychological and cultural consequences of imperialism in postcolonial literature.

Keywords: Abdulrazak Gurnah, Afterlives, German colonialism, Orientalism, mimicry, hybridity, identity, resistance, postcolonial literature, East Africa

Introduction

Abdulrazak Gurnah, recipient of the 2021 Nobel Prize in Literature, has consistently explored themes of exile, migration, memory, and the legacies of colonialism throughout his literary career. His novel Afterlives (2020) situates these themes within the specific historical context of German colonial rule in East Africa, foregrounding the experiences of ordinary individuals who were caught in the violent crosscurrents of empire. By focusing on the lives of Ilyas, Hamza, and Afiya, Gurnah sheds light on the complex processes of identity formation under colonial domination, where subjects are forced to negotiate fractured cultural inheritances, systemic violence, and shifting notions of belonging.

This study situates Gurnah's novel within the wider framework of postcolonial theory, drawing particularly on Edward Said's seminal concept of Orientalism (1978) and

Homi K. Bhabha's influential discussions of mimicry, hybridity, and ambivalence (1994). Said's work reveals how colonial powers constructed representations of the colonised as inferior Others, thereby legitimising domination and exploitation. Bhabha extends this analysis by examining the psychological and cultural effects of colonialism, particularly the ambivalent identities that emerge in the interstitial spaces between coloniser and colonised. Together, these frameworks enable a nuanced reading of Afterlives, illustrating how Gurnah represents identity as a contested and evolving process shaped by both coercion and creativity.

By using close reading and thematic analysis approach, the study examines how German colonial power structured cultural displacement and social hierarchies in East Africa, while also uncovering how marginalised individuals resisted, adapted, and reclaimed agency in the face of domination. The findings contribute to ongoing debates in postcolonial studies by demonstrating that Gurnah not only critiques imperialism but also foregrounds the resilience and creativity of colonised subjects in their search for selfhood.

The significance of this study lies in its attempt to bridge historical realities and literary imagination, revealing how literature serves as a space where suppressed voices are recuperated and alternative visions of identity are articulated. By interrogating the intersections of colonial power, cultural memory, and identity formation, this research aims to expand our understanding of the psychological, social, and cultural legacies of empire in African literature.

Statement of the Problem

Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives* is a poignant portrayal of the power dynamics of colonialism, where the colonisers prosper while the marginalised are left to grapple with an inner conflict. By examining the characters' development, this research deepens our understanding of the social structures that oppress the less privileged and the urgent struggle of these individuals to assert their identities. The study argues that a postcolonial lens is crucial for understanding the characters' identity crises and dilemmas. Furthermore, the novel's narration, with its intricate layers and complexities, is a pressing issue that can be best understood through the lens of postcolonialism. The author employs hybridity and Orientalism by Bhabha and Said

to explore how power relations in *Afterlives* lead to divided subjectivities and how to address this restriction.

Objectives of the Study

The primary objectives for the research are:

1. To examine how power structures shape individual and collective identities in *Afterlives*.

2. To analyse how characters navigate cultural displacement and gender dynamics under German colonial rule in *Afterlives*.

3. To investigate forms of resistance and identity reclamation in colonial and postcolonial contexts in *Afterlives*.

Research Questions

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do power structures influence the formation of individual and collective identities in *Afterlives*?

2. In what ways do characters experience and respond to cultural displacement and gender hierarchies in *Afterlives*?

3. How do marginalised characters resist colonial power and reclaim their cultural identities in *Afterlives*?

Literature Review

The concept of postcolonialism has become an indispensable tool in examining the enduring consequences of empire, particularly its effects on identity, power, and cultural memory. At its core, postcolonial theory interrogates the lingering structures of domination that persist beyond the official end of colonial rule. Edward Said's groundbreaking work Orientalism (1978) illustrates how the West constructed knowledge about the East as a means of domination. Said argues that the Orient was not a neutral geographical category but rather a discursive invention designed to affirm Western superiority. His notion of Otherness—by which colonial subjects are defined as exotic, backward, and uncivilised—provides a framework for understanding the cultural violence underpinning imperialism.

Homi K. Bhabha extends this discussion in The Location of Culture (1994), where he introduces the concepts of hybridity, mimicry, and ambivalence. For Bhabha, colonial

encounters produce new, hybrid identities that disrupt the rigid binaries between coloniser and colonised. Mimicry, the act of the colonised subject imitating the coloniser, is inherently ambivalent: it reinforces colonial authority while simultaneously undermining it by exposing its instability. Hybridity, on the other hand, signifies cultural transformation and negotiation in what Bhabha terms the 'Third Space.' These theoretical frameworks are crucial for analysing Gurnah's Afterlives, which presents characters navigating fractured subjectivities in colonial and postcolonial East Africa.

Frantz Fanon's contributions in works such as Black Skin, White Masks (1952) and The Wretched of the Earth (1963) provide a psychological dimension to postcolonial discourse. Fanon emphasises the internalisation of colonial hierarchies, arguing that colonised individuals often experience deep crises of identity, oscillating between assimilation and alienation. This insight is directly relevant to characters like Ilyas and Hamza, whose struggles embody the psychological scars of colonial domination.

Scholars have explored the persistence of cultural trauma in postcolonial texts. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (1989) highlight how language and representation are central to colonial authority, noting that colonial discourse constructs hierarchical power relations that endure even in post-independence contexts. Stuart Hall (1990, 1996) further complicates the idea of identity by proposing that it is not fixed but constantly produced through cultural and historical processes. Hall's theorisation of identity as a 'production' resonates strongly with Gurnah's work, where characters forge identities through negotiation, memory, and resistance rather than static traditions.

African writers such as Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and Wole Soyinka have long emphasised the relationship between literature and decolonisation. Achebe's Things Fall Apart (1958) foregrounds the cultural disruption brought by British rule in Igbo society, while Ngũgĩ's Decolonising the Mind (1986) critiques the colonial imposition of European languages on African epistemologies. These works provide a foundation for situating Gurnah's Afterlives within a broader tradition of postcolonial African literature that foregrounds resistance, cultural negotiation, and

memory.

Recent scholarship has begun to focus specifically on Gurnah's oeuvre. Quayson (2020) highlights how Gurnah's narratives foreground exile, displacement, and the complexities of memory. Mustafa (2021) underscores the author's ability to situate East African experiences within global colonial histories, portraying both individual trauma and collective resilience. Critics such as Roy (2021) and Solloway (2021) note that Afterlives represents not just historical fiction but a deeply personalised account of ordinary Africans navigating colonial violence and its aftermath. These studies affirm Gurnah's significance as a novelist who bridges history and imagination, situating African voices at the centre of world literature.

Colonisation is a complex phenomenon with vastly different implications for the colonisers and the colonised. Historically, powerful nations have invaded, colonised, and exploited weaker nations through force, often justifying their actions under civilisation and progress. For the victorious colonisers, it is often perceived as a triumph, a glorious expansion of their empire. In contrast, for the colonised, it signifies an immense loss of freedom, culture, and identity (Said, 1963; Johnston, 2011). The colonisers always regard the colonised as others of them. They are backward, uncultured, savage, and uncivilised; therefore, they are others in civilised Europe. Said's concept of Otherness, derived from his seminal work *Orientalism*, critiques how the West has historically constructed the East as inferior, exotic, and passive. Said draws inspiration from Michel Foucault's theories on power and knowledge.

Said (1978) asserts that colonial discourse does not merely misrepresent colonised people but actively defines them in opposition to Western superiority. In *Afterlives*, this construction of identity is evident in how the colonisers perceive and treat native Africans, reducing them to mere objects of European narratives. Said's insights are instrumental in understanding the role of representation in maintaining colonial dominance and the necessity of deconstructing these imposed identities to reclaim indigenous voices, thereby empowering the colonised. On the helm of colonialism was the hungry industry of Europe.

Bridge (2018) argues that the industries of European nations were eager for resources,

leading them to engage in a race to conquer distant lands and exploit their wealth. The most suitable regions for them were the continents of Asia and Africa. Even after their liberation, the formerly colonised areas continued to feel the effects of the colonial powers. The postcolonial effect encompasses the entire period of imperialism, starting with the colonial takeover and continuing to the present. It was a revolution which started on European soil, made it greedy, led to colonialism to imperialism through the emergence of social institutions.

Ashcroft et al. (1989) point out that the evolution of social institutions and historical events has been significantly influenced by imperialism. Imperialism has shaped major human concerns such as identity, culture, gender equality, and ethnicity. The inclusion of literary works written during the postcolonial era in the curricula of esteemed literature courses at universities like Cambridge and Oxford, among others, has confirmed their significance in the context of world literature.

Identities are negotiated in postcolonial texts. Young (1995) explains that in the 1990s, postcolonial criticism began to rise. It has emerged as a significant field of literary study in response to the independence movements of previously colonised nations. It explores themes such as identity, hybridity, resistance, and power structures that shaped the colonial and postcolonial world. Various theorists have contributed distinct perspectives to this discourse, each adding depth to our understanding of colonialism's enduring effects.

By integrating these concepts into the analysis of postcolonial literature, particularly Afterlives by Abdulrazak Gurnah, one can gain a more profound insight into the struggles and identity crises experienced by marginalised communities. This ongoing relevance of postcolonial literature, as it engages with contemporary issues and the evolving nature of identity in a multicultural world, is a testament to its enduring significance. Scholars place great importance on analysing the quest for identity due to its profound effects on how the world developed after colonisation ended. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (1989) assert that most postcolonial literature centres on exile and relocation abroad. This process reveals the individual's identity quest and their struggle to rediscover and rebuild a relationship with their new home. Ahluwalia (1989) argues that this better reflects the dual identities of colonised people

and those in the diaspora. Literature, as a powerful medium, preserves history from different perspectives. Eagleton (1996) states that postcolonial literature addresses the emergence of multicultural identity and the overthrow of colonial regimes. In emerging nations, it signifies the beginning of a new era that has developed from numerous independence movements.

Nevertheless, there remain gaps in scholarship. While critics have acknowledged hybridity and resistance in Gurnah's work, few studies have systematically applied both Said's and Bhabha's frameworks to Afterlives. The present research therefore contributes by foregrounding how the characters' identities are fractured and reshaped through colonial hierarchies, cultural displacement, and gendered oppression. By situating Afterlives within the broader traditions of postcolonial theory and African literature, this study highlights the novel's importance as both a critique of colonialism and a testament to the resilience of marginalised communities.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design, focusing on textual analysis of Abdulrazak Gurnah's Afterlives (2020). The primary method of inquiry is close reading, supported by thematic and discourse analysis. This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the ways in which characters' identities are constructed and contested under colonial rule. By situating the text within the frameworks of Edward Said's Orientalism (1978) and Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of hybridity, mimicry, and ambivalence (1994), the study examines how cultural displacement, colonial hierarchies, and patriarchal norms shape fractured subjectivities.

The primary data consist of the novel itself, with particular attention given to passages depicting Ilyas, Hamza, and Afiya. Secondary sources include scholarly works on postcolonial theory, African literature, and existing criticism of Gurnah's novels. These sources provide critical perspectives and theoretical grounding for the analysis. Selection of data followed principles of relevance, reliability, and authenticity, ensuring that only passages and scholarly materials directly related to the research questions were included.

Data analysis proceeded through three steps: (1) identifying textual moments of identity negotiation, displacement, or resistance; (2) interpreting these moments through Said's and Bhabha's theoretical frameworks; and (3) synthesising the findings to highlight broader implications for postcolonial identity formation. This process foregrounded the lived experiences of marginalised characters, showing how their identities are not merely imposed by colonial authority but also shaped through resistance, adaptation, and survival. The methodology is interpretive, aiming not at statistical generalisation but at theoretical and cultural insight.

Data Analysis and Findings

The analysis of Afterlives reveals how colonial power structures profoundly shape the identities of marginalised individuals. Each of the central characters—Ilyas, Hamza, and Afiya—embodies different responses to the pressures of colonial domination, illustrating the ambivalence and hybridity that Bhabha (1994) identifies as characteristic of the postcolonial condition.

Ilyas exemplifies the ambivalent nature of mimicry. Abducted as a child and raised in a German mission school, he internalises the coloniser's language, religion, and worldview. His attempt to assimilate renders him 'almost the same, but not quite' (Bhabha, 1994), leaving him alienated from both his native community and his colonial mentors. Ilyas' fate underscores the psychological costs of mimicry, revealing how the desire for acceptance within colonial structures often results in displacement and loss of self.

Hamza's story highlights the potential of hybridity as a mode of survival and transformation. Conscripted into the German Schutztruppe, he endures extreme violence and exploitation, leaving deep psychological scars. Yet, upon his return, Hamza forges a new identity by selectively retaining aspects of his cultural heritage while adapting to postcolonial realities. His hybrid subjectivity resists fixed definitions, embodying Bhabha's notion of the Third Space where new cultural meanings emerge.

Afiya, doubly marginalised by colonialism and patriarchy, represents resilience and agency under oppression. Orphaned and abused, she nevertheless asserts her dignity and strives toward self-determination. Her struggle highlights the

intersectionality of gender and colonial power, echoing Gayatri Spivak's (1988) critique of the silencing of subaltern voices. Afiya's ability to redefine herself against systemic oppression demonstrates the transformative possibilities of resistance in postcolonial contexts.

The fragmented identities of Ilyas, Hamza, and Afiya are a direct consequence of colonial domination. This domination seeks to impose an Othered identity (Said, 1978) upon the colonised, leading to complex negotiations of selfhood often characterised by Bhabha's (1994) concepts of hybridity and ambivalence. Issues of their individuality, status, age, sexuality, and gender become significant points through which colonial power affects all three characters directly, including how they form their identities.

Afterlives, is a testament to the resilience of the human spirit in the face of colonial oppression. The characters, Ilyas, Hamza, and Afiya, refuse to be defined by the destruction around them. Instead, they persevere, striving to redefine themselves in the aftermath of war. Their journey, marked by hope and unwavering determination, is a central theme of the novel, inspiring the audience with their resilience.

The primary focus is on how "individuality" changes in light of colonial authority and how Ilyas, Hamza, and Afiya navigate their shifting cultural backgrounds. The two male characters, Ilyas and Hamza, are analysed here, while Afiya's experiences illuminate the gendered aspect of grappling with individuality amid the ongoing stress of colonial rule. Ilyas, kidnapped as a child, embodies a form of Bhabha's (1994) mimicry, as his subsequent enlistment with the Germans demonstrates an internalisation of colonial ideology. In contrast, Hamza signed up for the Schutztruppe during a time of anger but later regrets his decision, leading to a different method of forging his identity. Afiya faces loss and oppression in her youth, highlighting how a sense of self diligently resists domination. A comparison of their lives illustrates how the colonial environment, through processes of Othering (Said, 1978) and the creation of ambivalent subjects (Bhabha, 1994), profoundly influences individual African identities.

Ilyas' journey begins against his past, marked by struggles arising from European colonialism. As a result of the Maji Maji resistance, people suffered greatly from

upset and despair. Native populations, like Ilyas' impoverished parents, were direct victims. Ilyas' ragged appearance and hunger, along with his mother's pregnancy and his father's illness, depict acute deprivation. To escape this, Ilyas flees, and the colonial authority forces him to migrate even as a young child. Lacking a clear direction, Ilyas begs and feels frightened as he travels to a coastal region. Observing the signs of war, he sees men battling and chooses to join the askari. On seeing Ilyas, An askari representing how the colonisers treat people, grabs him and places him on a train. This act exemplifies colonial power imposing itself, initiating Ilyas into a system designed to erase his original identity and remould him according to coloniser needs, a process Said (1978) identifies as fundamental to Orientalist discourse. This moment exposes Ilyas to the inherent hybridity of colonial power, as he witnesses his Black peers adopting colonial identities. At this point, he becomes more aware of himself. His forced migration into the mountains shapes his future experiences. He attends a German mission school, where he is taught the coloniser's religion and language. Initially, Ilyas pretends to engage in Christian prayer. This pretence is short-lived; before long, he becomes a pupil at a school for new converts, marking the first stage of adopting the coloniser's life. Siundu (2010) notes that "religious experiences demarcate forms of identities within groups (p.115)." Thus, this study contends that the first colonial influence on Ilyas' identity is the imposition of Christian prayers, which undermines his initial subjectivity.

Following this, Ilyas starts to mimic the language and behaviours of the colonisers. As Ashcroft et al. argue, "[l]anguage becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated (p.7)." By acquiring the foreign linguistic system, Ilyas perpetuates German power, collaborating in establishing colonial order. Most importantly, during his nine years in this German environment, Ilyas' assumption of German thought and pursuit of a "civilized" land exemplify a deep internalisation of colonial ideology. The Germans reject his sense of identity, choosing to remould it to suit their needs. In Bhabha's (1994) terms, Ilyas becomes a figure of mimicry— "almost the same, but not quite"—adopting the colonial superior identity. This is not subversive hybridity but assimilation, underscoring the ambivalence of his position: striving to be German, yet fundamentally Othered (Said,

1978).

He finds comfort in living with a German farmer. Because of this friendship, he secures a job working on a German sisal estate. The coloniser benefits from Ilyas' undefined individuality. This third migration reveals him as a "government man," his hybrid self after nine years. His deep absorption of colonial thinking prevents him from realising that he is a slave to his master. This blindness to his "inferior" position leads him to imagine German acceptance. Afterwards, he encounters Khalifa in an unnamed town, and their friendship motivates Ilyas to decide to go to his village. As a migrant, he feels unwelcome and out of place, struggling to recall names, with everything disturbed by the war as Gurnah said, "He felt like an intruder" (Gurnah, 2020, p. 135). Through his neighbours, Ilyas learns of his mother's death and his sister, Afiya. He finds Afiya in another village, enslaved by relatives—a repetition of colonial "discriminatory identity effects" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 154) by Black people. The colonisers deny Afiya's subjectivity. Ilyas rescues her. Because of what Europeans did, Ilyas and Afiya find comfort in each other. As Afiya's older brother, Ilyas is working to establish a future together with her.

The narrative then introduces Hamza. The chapter's beginning presents Hamza as an askari. The study investigates his background to comprehend why he has joined the army. Hamza has given crude objectivity and barely any family by the merchant "Uncle." He is transferred to the coast, much like a product, and faces restrictions. He can undertake an arduous task, starting with oppression, bloodshed, and alienation. Upon returning, Hamza realises his bondage; he is a silenced subaltern. Consequently, he deserts to work for the Kaiser as an askari without fully grasping the sacrifices involved. His decision to become an askari distances him from a loyal friend (the slave boy) and Afiya, whom he is beginning to love. Due to strong colonial ideologies, he chooses to side with the colonisers.

Soon, Hamza comes to understand his mistake in a European serfdom that is more tyrannical than his master's. Recruitment days are challenging. Anxiety surges as they march. The heat is oppressive; sweat and exhaustion are evident with every step along unused roads on their journey. Troops are on the road all day, even without shoes. Hamza's legs and back ache; he moves instinctively, too tired and ravenous. He

is forced to relocate and arrives at the camp in a state of confusion. With nowhere else to go, he stays. The camp regime is harsher. He learns that equality is a myth while wearing an Askari uniform. They forbade him from looking at German officers, fearing it would upend the hierarchy of masters and slaves. Hamza is assigned as the Oberleutnant's batman. His tasks—filling the washbasin, carrying coffee, making the bed, and cleaning—are typically associated with women in his culture, reflecting the nature of close-up, personal service. He must clean the officer's apartment under watchful eyes and run errands. The colonists have taken control of Hamza's life, erasing his voice and place. Afiya, in her later domestic role, echoes some of these gendered expectations but from a position of relative agency within her marriage, unlike Hamza's forced servitude.

As with most of his companions, Hamza observes war happening. Colonisers and askari move across borders, taking from and assaulting local people. Schutztruppe askari, instructed by terror-expert officers, devastate Hamza's land "while they struggled on in their blind and murderous embrace of a cause whose origins they did not know and whose ambitions were vain and ultimately intended for their domination" (Gurnah, 2020, p. 91). As an askari, Hamza endures terror, bloodshed, sickness, hunger, and death in the senseless war he finds himself enmeshed in. Images embed in his mind, delimiting his future. His servant status persists; he serves German missionaries as a mere Other (Said, 1978), transporting equipment, foraging, cooking, and cleaning. Despite his exhaustion, his superiors remain indifferent. Hamza embodies Bhabha's (1994) ambivalence, the same (askari) but different (colonial subject).

In the new town, people greet him but he does not recognise them. Briefly, "[h]e felt like an intruder" (p. 135). Not long after, Hamza begins to help merchant Nassor Biashara. Through Khalifa, Hamza assumes responsibilities and strives to rebuild his life. His despair about his memories prevents him from separating present life from the future. He evades Khalifa's questions by remaining silent or shrugging, which incurs Khalifa's wrath: "What is wrong with you? Can't you speak?" (Gurnah, 2020, p. 145). Finding himself in conflict, Hamza stops talking and shrinks; as a result, he forgets things. He retains fragments troubled by gaps in his memory. Shame from

past mistakes prevents him from speaking. Homeless, Hamza sleeps by the warehouse. Khalifa rescues him, providing safety. Khalifa shares a roof, cares for Hamza's welfare, provides nourishment and advice, and tends to his aching legs. Hamza is joyful. Hamza meets his beloved Afiya at Khalifa's home. After Ilyas abandoned her, Khalifa rescues Afiya, and she starts living there. The study explores Hamza and Afiya's relationship.

Nevertheless, concerning Hamza's individuality, Afiya helps map his identity. She tends to his physical aches and worries, acknowledging his sense of disconnection and disorientation. Hamza can forget his hardships when she shows him love. He assists her with Ilyas' disappearance. Hamza and Afiya come back to life together, restoring their lives after the chaos of war. Unlike Hamza, Ilyas lacks strong feelings of restoration because the colonial system consumed all that he was.

As a counter-narrative to colonial fragmentation, Afterlives gives locals like Hamza and Afiya a hope for a strong feeling of connection and community following European conquest and arbitrary border imposition. Hamza's migration to his hometown grants him a sense of belonging, alongside Afiya's affection. The community recognises his background and identity, even when denied by colonial forces. His town provides him with personhood. In many African countries, social status typically correlates with the community one belongs to. Menkiti (1984) argues, "It is in rootedness in an ongoing human community that the individual comes to see himself as a man" (p. 171-2). For this reason, Hamza, as a colonial subject, can only realise a strong sense of self by joining the local community. This community, for both Hamza and later Afiya through her marriage to him, can be seen as a Bhabhian Third Space (Bhabha, 1994), where an alternative, non-colonial identity can be forged, demonstrating a form of resistance and cultural reclamation. The Muslim community plays a significant role in shaping Hamza's personal identity, a place that never reaches Ilyas, leaving him brooding overall.

It is not unreasonable to say that Hamza was able to join the Muslim community after returning to town. Visiting the place of worship alleviates his initial feelings of dislocation. In the absence of mosques, he headed to the one he heard calling from his workplace. Although he fears rejection, he is perplexed when

"[p]eople shuffled up to make space for him" (Gurnah, 2020, p. 150). Despite feeling like a stranger, this unexpected warmth encourages Hamza to stay. He feels comfortable being with other Black people. He continues to go to the mosque with Khalifa, hoping it will help him feel better. The mosque, representing Hamza's identity, becomes a space for him to arrange his troubled mind. Before prayer, he rests quietly, his gaze lowered, and shakes hands without words afterwards. Significantly, he does not have to speak, allowing him to address his concerns after the war. Although Afiya is not part of this specific male space, she later finds her status and sense of belonging within the family and the broader circles of Muslim women, which are influenced by her marriage to Hamza.

Supporting a consolidated Muslim community, the narrative describes "Ramadhan was a communal event" (Gurnah, 2020, p. 195), featuring shared meals. The holy month holds significance for Hamza as a time of prayer, quiet reflection, and community. Hamza is depicted sitting and enjoying food with Khalifa. During Ramadhan, Hamza is frequently invited to join friends and neighbours in listening to Khalifa's views. Despite Hamza's silence, these invitations grant him personhood. Hamza discovers a sense of community and belonging, similar to those around him. This integration into a pre-existing cultural framework provides resistance to colonial Othering (Said, 1978). Being part of Afiya's life within the family, through Hamza, provides her with a stronger cultural identity.

In Afterlives, the analysis of "Age" centers on Hamza and Afiya and the significant influence of colonial upheavals on their perception and experience of aging. This impact, which reflects broader cultural displacement and gender hierarchies, is a heavy burden on the characters. For Hamza, his in-betweenness (Bhabha, 1994) regarding age, his failure to map a consistent age identity, and his pretence of being older while retaining childish behaviours has been examined. Afiya's assumed age in Afterlives is also explored, as war distorts her understanding of her birthdate. The colonial context (Said, 1978) often disrupts traditional life markers. Ilyas' age, while less ambiguous, is framed by his early abduction and accelerated, distorted entry into the adult roles of the colonial military, bypassing typical developmental stages. The weight of these disruptions on the characters' age

identities is crucial to understand, as it shapes their struggles and evokes a sense of empathy in the audience.

Hamza is initially introduced in the study when he gets enlisted in army with the other Askari. According to Gurnah, "Hamza had lied about his age in order to gain attention and get free from bondage (Gurnah, 2020, p. 57)." Although it is impossible to determine his exact age, he is most likely around twenty. He would want not to be seen as a young man, as evidenced by his deception. The adolescents longs to be accepted as a man. Integration into the male Askari community would recognise him as a man, which is mediated by gender as a cultural age variable (Longhurst et al., 2008). He believes that pretence would liberate him from oppression. However, he does not realise that his lie make him part of the wider colonial management system. Officers, eager for recruits, accept Hamza's statement. Since he is surrounded by much older men, his lies are self-evident. Spending time with other Askari is insufficient to fulfil Hamza's wish to be viewed as a man.

The officer treats Hamza like a child the whole time, ordering him to answer "Ndio bwana." The officer consistently addresses Hamza condescendingly, instructing him to respond with "Ndio bwana." Later, after Hamza complies, the officer continues to demean him, asking, "Are you frightened of me?" to which Hamza replied, "Ndio bwana," raising his voice. The officer then laughs and remarks, "[Y]ou respond to me in that childish manner. Now, please answer me appropriately (p. 86)."

Many German officers view Hamza as a child and treat him like a toy, even when simple questions are posed in a foreign language: "Wie alt sind Sie?" He perceives a dismissive attitude he cannot comprehend and resists being labelled as a child. His surroundings address him with a mocking tone, as if he were indeed a child. Although Askari refers to him as young man, which might fulfil Hamza's desire to be seen as an adult, it is not what he truly seeks. The adjective "young" shapes Hamza's identity, prompting him to contemplate what actions genuinely define adulthood and why he is not recognised as a man. Chapter seven provides age details: "Your record says you were twenty when you joined up, but … [y]ou could not have been more than seventeen" (Gurnah, 2020, p. 118). The officer's cleverness confirms Hamza's youth, urges honesty, and cautions against deceit.

However, Hamza is reluctant to acknowledge that his appearance revealed his true identity, as he pretends to be an adult. Ombasha, an Askari instructor, correctly recognises the teenage protagonist as "boy" and categorises him as such for seventeen years. Even though he was called "boy" for so long, Hamza believes he is a man because he feels grown up through his lies, not realising he is upset. The denial of maturity by his Askari peers and the rejection of manhood by German officials deeply affect Hamza. His mind always seems confused after joining the army and moving to the old town. A new place offeres him an opportunity to assert his age and pursue adult responsibilities. On the other hand, Ilyas starts military work at an early age, even before he was a man, thanks to colonial officials.

Hamza is twenty-four years old when he arrives and is classified as a young man. Culture demands appropriate behaviour for one's age. Afiya becomes his love, and they marry, having a child named Ilyas. Because they are men, society forgives them for procreating. Fatherhood marks a man's consolidation. People assume that their actions respond to societal expectations. However, these societal expectations are often unrealistic and place a heavy burden on individuals. Narrative passages contradict this. They do not experience unsettling dreams or nightmares, which are typically associated with fearful children and courageous men. The pain continues for him after marriage, proving he is still childish and suffers from persistent trauma, as noted by Fanon (1967) regarding the psychological impact of colonialism.

Another example is his repetition of the phrase "I was young" to emphasise the truth about his age. This phrase serves as a constant reminder of his actual age, a fact that he often tries to deny or hide. He prevents himself from forming his own identity because he rejects the adjective. He exhibits "childish" behaviour, as noted by youth, yet still feels a sense of manhood. Readers feel distress in passages about severe war violence. Society perceives sorrow as childish, but in his mind, fate's man cannot escape. Therefore, he tries to prove his manhood through his plans but fails again. Ilyas' son yearns for an identity; he now behaves in the way culture thinks a man should behave. People only see him as a man when he becomes a father. Hamza's wish is fulfilled, and he gains recognition.

Regarding sex and gender analysis in Afterlives, this study examines distinct but

complementary sections, focusing on how characters experience and respond to gender hierarchies within a colonial and patriarchal context. At the beginning of the story, Khalifa and Asha, as a married couple, behave according to their respective biological sexes and traditional Muslim beliefs. Additionally, Afiya conforms to the roles society deems typical for women. Furthermore, Hamza's sexual and gender identity is analysed for male self-mapping. Colonial and patriarchal systems often rigidly enforced the construction of gender (Spivak, 1988). Ilyas' decision to assert himself in his colonial role as an askari sheds light on the construction of gender. Initially, the study examines the sexual and gender identities of Khalifa and Asha.

Chapter one introduces the marriage arranged by Amur Biashara. As a reward for Khalifa's work, Amur encourages him to ask for the hand of twenty-year-old Asha. Buchbinder: The ideology of gender treats sexual difference as the only acceptable way. The patriarchal society expects the bride to remain silent and ignorant. Khalifa recognises the bride-to-be's limited understanding and conventional feminine traits. Prior to and throughout the wedding, the bride-to-be is unfamiliar to him. Men take control of all matters and keep women at a distance. Khalifa consents to the marriage in the presence of the imam, while Amur Biashara, a prominent male figure, gives his approval to Asha's name, illustrating a deeply rooted gender tradition. Khalifa first meets Asha only after their marriage so she can help him understand why this was done to her. Amur relieves himself of his niece Asha, a burden that gender entails, making Khalifa's responsibility seem as if womanhood obstructed independence.

Asha symbolises women's commodification, marginalisation, and exclusion from a male-dominated world. Wearing wedding clothes provides the respectability of a family name. Amur fears that his niece might succumb to temptation, given the prevalence of scandalous love affairs among women and the potential for embarrassment. Poor Asha becomes Other (Said, 1978), her agency constrained by patriarchal, implicitly colonial power structures that reinforce gender roles. Gurnah's postcolonial perspective reinforces these gender roles. Khalifa and Asha internalise gendered values, do not question women's behaviours, and exhibit greater restraint. During the initial years of their marriage, Asha obediently yields to her husband's joy. Marriage is Asha's duty, imposed by her uncle and accepted by society. When a

woman conceives, society exalts the female gender. However, since she does not fulfil all the expectations of womanhood, she loses her baby three times. Asha fully accepts that a woman should obey. She never recognises her own inferior status (Spivak, 1988). As Afiya was tasked with raising her, she adopts the mindset of those who imposed this duty on her. The second objective of the analysis is to explore Afiya's sexual and gender identity, including her actions, behaviours, and the societal values associated with gender. Before Khalifa rescues Afiya, she lives with her family following her mother's death and her father's illness. Aunt Malaika and Uncle Makame, who are not Afiya's biological relatives, raised children in a similar way; however, Afiya's time with them was brief and focused on her individual sexual and gender identity.

Since childhood, Afiya witnesses Malaika wearing a kanga, which is typical Muslim women's clothing. Afiya realises that girls should do chores while her uncle enjoyed bathing in her warm water. Makame epitomises male power. Makame, a powerful man and government guard, instills fear in others. Within the house, patriarch Makame would hit and scold his children, including Afiya. He slaps her without any explanation, causing her to stumble and feel dizzy. Nobody questions him. He disregards her actions when she writes, resulting in an injury to her left hand, and no one offers assistance. Makame's eyes reveal that society does not accept Afiya's female gender, relegating women to a submissive and dependent role within the home. His wife informs him of Afiya's abilities, aware that punishment for this rebel act would be deemed inappropriate and dishonourable. Malaika, identifying as a herbalist, defends her husband, claiming that it is an accident. Afiya receives and instinctively internalises the immoral idea, leading to her understanding of gender roles. Gender prescribes her as dutiful and forbids women from engaging in written work. In comparing herself to the patriarchy, Afiya comes to realise that only men are deemed important, leaving her feeling powerless and marginalised. Ilyas contributes to Afiya's subjection by leaving her with her traditional family, even if only momentarily, and exemplifies the numerous ethical dilemmas of colonial times.

Discussion

The findings of this study reinforce the central insights of postcolonial theory while

offering new perspectives on Gurnah's representation of East Africa under German colonialism. Said's Orientalism is vividly illustrated in the depiction of Africans as inferior Others, a discourse internalised by characters like Ilyas and resisted by figures like Afiya. Bhabha's concepts of mimicry and hybridity shed light on the ambivalent strategies employed by characters navigating colonial structures. Hamza's hybrid subjectivity, for example, reflects the instability of colonial authority, as his identity resists neat categorisation within colonial binaries.

This study highlights the intersection of colonial and patriarchal oppression. Afiya's experience demonstrates how gender compounds the vulnerabilities of colonial subjects, a point underexplored in previous scholarship on Afterlives. By foregrounding her resilience, the novel not only critiques the silencing of women in colonial histories but also affirms their role as agents of cultural survival and transformation.

These insights align with and extend existing research. Scholars such as Quayson (2020) and Mustafa (2021) have noted Gurnah's focus on exile and displacement, while Roy (2021) emphasises the novel's historical grounding. The present study adds to this body of work by systematically applying Said's and Bhabha's theories to demonstrate how Afterlives stages the psychological, cultural, and gendered dimensions of colonialism. In doing so, it underscores literature's role in recovering subaltern voices and contesting hegemonic narratives of empire.

Conclusion

This study has examined how Abdulrazak Gurnah's Afterlives (2020) represents the impact of colonial power on identity formation in East Africa. Through the experiences of Ilyas, Hamza, and Afiya, the novel portrays the fragmentation, ambivalence, and resilience that characterise postcolonial identities. Using Said's concept of Orientalism and Bhabha's theories of mimicry and hybridity, the analysis demonstrated how colonial power imposed cultural displacement and trauma but also generated spaces for resistance and cultural negotiation.

The study contributes to postcolonial scholarship by emphasising the intersectionality of colonial and gendered oppression, highlighting the agency of marginalised individuals in reclaiming subjectivity. It also underscores the importance

of literature as a medium for preserving cultural memory and challenging imperial historiography. Gurnah's Afterlives thus emerges as a vital text that not only critiques colonial power but also affirms the resilience of those who endured its violence.

Future research could expand this analysis by comparing Gurnah's work with other African novelists who address colonial legacies, or by exploring the ecological dimensions of colonial exploitation in Afterlives. Additionally, greater attention to oral histories and indigenous epistemologies could enrich understandings of cultural memory and identity formation. Such research would continue the important task of foregrounding African voices and experiences in the study of colonialism and its afterlives.

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